

CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN THE AUDIT PROFESSION - CASE OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

Gender equality and gender balance are keywords in the today's professional environment and are having increasing impact on the companies' policies and code of conducts as well as on the overall attitude among professional people. Finance, accounting and auditing are only some of the professions where women have been historically engaged in Albania, even in the time of centralized economy. First hand observation of reality suggests that even though women seem to be more in number than man, among the auditors, both external and internal auditors, it is not easy for women to climb the career steps towards leading and managerial roles or gain partnerships in their firms and this seems to be a common trend globally. Within this wide global context this paper tries to search this reality in Albania and focuses on the challenges of the women auditors in our country. The raise several questions such as: How can we describe the situation of women in the audit profession in Albania in terms of numbers, years in career and advancement to higher positions in companies of external auditing or in departments of internal audit? Which are the main challenges that auditor women face in their profession in Albania, trying to make a distinction between common global factors that impact the profession overall in the world, and which may be specific factors in Albania. We answer this questions semi-structured interviews targeting professional women that work as freelance auditors, as partners in auditing firms (including the big 4) and as internal auditors in big companies in Albania. The results of the study revealed that long working hours, preference of Albanian clients to work with male auditors, non-results driven performance management and gender stereotyping were perceived to be the biggest challenges that women auditors are currently experiencing.

Keywords: gender balance; audit profession; challenges for women auditors

JEL classification: M40, M41

1. INTRODUCTION

The scarcity of females in high positions in the auditing and / or accounting profession is a long discussed topic, even though not always through theoretical or empirical research papers and articles. A simple internet search will show that this topic is the focus of many reports, news and articles in different spoken and visual, periodical and even social media. If we focus on the topic of the scarcity of females in high positions of Big Four audit firms as well as their higher turnover compared to their male peers, we are able to find more coverage in the accounting research (Lehman, 1992; Browne, 2005), (Loft, 1992; Roberts and Coutts, 1992) even though, we have to admit that this coverage comes mainly from Anglo-Saxon publication resources, and not as much from European countries or Australia, South America or East Asia.

In the United States, as of 2010 (Catalyst, 2011), at Deloitte and KPMG, women comprised 18.8% of the partners, while this number was 16.9% at PwC with no data available for E&Y). The presence of females at the global board of the Big Four companies is: Deloitte 18.75%; E&Y 22%; KPMG 4% and PwC 11%¹. In the same context, when we search Deloitte Albania we find that it has 33% of female representatives among partners whereas in lower levels we find increasingly more women (57% among directors and senior managers and 67% female representatives among managers). The case of Deloitte Albania is also another representation of the overall observation, introduced above that the higher you go in an auditing company, the less women auditors you will find, even though there are more women than men that study accounting and auditing in Universities and that first enter the profession.

According the research of Dambrin and Lambert, (2012) there may be several explanations for the rarity of females in top positions in accounting and auditing. These explanations vary from results from serious and thorough research such as the barriers that women face in accessing the profession and afterwards difficulties within organizations as well as sociological level barriers in terms of gender stereotypes and expectations from the clients of the auditing firms to even superficial claiming and statements that women may just be “different” than men and therefore this might explain it all.

Studies from European context such as that of Lupu, (2012) who focused in France and Belgium confirm what we have already observed for the Anglo-Saxon countries, implying that this is a worldwide issue which should be the focus of serious and comprehensive studies in the future. Combined with the general lack of such studies in the context of Albania, this was one motivation to study the current context of gender parity in the auditing profession in Albania and to focus mainly on their perceived challenges. The methodology of this study was that of detailed and possibly personal interviews performed with women auditors working at various job environments as well as from various age intervals. During the interviewing phase the topic of this paper was well received from the subjects of the interviews. In

¹ Data for the number of countries where each Big Four is present is for the year 2016 and was collected directly from the Big Four global websites.

general they expressed that this was an interesting area needing extensive future research. Beyond gender problematics, many other issues such as life / work balance, quality of life etc., emerged from the answers of the interviewed subjects convincing us that women in the audit profession in Albania are much more demanding in their profession than the level of the research in this context, and therefore suggesting further more elaborate studies on the topic.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section we focus on a general literature review on topics of gender and auditing. As previously mentioned, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study according to this topic in Albania, (no such studies exist about Albania specifically), and therefore our focus is mainly global. In the third section we focus to give some more information on the context and perspectives of women in auditing and accounting; we analyze the global as well as the local context. In the fourth section we present the results of our research on the challenges represented by the auditing environment for women in Albania. We collect data through open questions' interviews through which we aim to gather mainly qualitative data from carefully selected subjects who have enough to say and to share their opinions. In the last section we represent the main findings and conclusions of the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW - GENDER AND AUDITING

One of the first observations when focused on the literature review for this study was the scarcity of research that linked gender issues with auditing and / or accounting. Therefore the scope of the literature review was expanded to include the linkage between accounting/auditing and gender. In this case we are motivated by the fact that usually the profession of accounting and auditing are interrelated, performed both in the same type of firm, or just stages in the professional career.

Dambrin and Lambert in their paper (2012) perform a thorough analysis of the papers and articles that have been published in accounting journals and that focus on gender issues up to year 2009. With the first published paper on this topic in 1987 (in Accounting, Organizations and Society Journal) their research numbers 156 papers in total. They also report that three Journals only, Accounting, Accountability & Auditing Journal (AAAJ), Accounting, Organizations & Society (AOS) and Critical Perspectives on Accounting (CPA) account for two-thirds of all scientific work on gender studies, which indicates that the interrelation of the theme of gender and that of auditing predominantly attracts the interest of those accounting journals that can be classified as having a sociological and/or critical orientation. Another researcher, Haynes (2008a), states that: *“the fact that gender is addressed prominently in special editions and in journals that are critical in nature indicates that gender issues have not yet entered the mainstream accountancy research²”*.

Czarniawska, in his study of (2008) concludes that in general the topic of gender relations in accountancy firms remains under-researched. In the same year

² *Cursive writing represents direct literal citation from the stated referenced paper.*

Haynes (2008a) in her article summarizes the streams of the various theories and methodologies that are used in the academic accountancy articles that address gender issues and what these streams may imply for future research. Also in 2008, another researcher, Walker, in his study focuses on the extent to which accountancy historians have engaged on women's issues in general and what is the historical role of gender in the accountancy profession. He also covers the potential influence of feminist theory on accountancy and auditing.

In another paper of 2008 Haynes, (2008b), explores another line of research in gender and auditing, which explores women's participation and experiences in the profession. Her research concludes with the fact that women face continuing gender discrimination in their workplace and that factors such as motherhood and child-rearing present serious obstacles to women's promotion prospects. According to the study of Humphrey et al., (2013) gender is an important variable that partially explains the salary differences in the auditing and accountancy profession. Haynes (2016) after reviewing 25 years of research in gender and accounting, reports that gendered histories of accounting and stories of individual struggles show barriers to entry being overcome; but challenges remain. In both the public and private business and domestic arenas, accountancy has operated to reproduce gender inequality. Some researchers have even suggested that the nature of accountancy itself represents masculine values, represses feminine qualities and fails to engage the emotional dimension (Hines, 1992; Broadbent, 1998).

However, as pointed in the study by Jeny A (2017) the majority of research on gender and accountancy belongs to feminist empiricism or a "gender-as-a-variable" that has a focus on the Anglo-Saxon contexts (the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia). That means that these studies focus on issues such as ethics, career drivers, job turnover intentions, sexual harassment, behavioral attitudes, gender role stereotypes, communication techniques and audit quality levels dependent on auditor gender or audit fee premiums usually observed in case of female auditors (Hardies et al., 2015).

Studies in more recent years provide evidence that goes beyond just the Anglo-Saxon context and encompasses other countries as well. Komori (2008) focus his study in the Japanese environment and culture, exploring the experiences of the Japanese women and *argues that women have changed accountancy practices by applying a feminine approach to their work*. A limited but growing literature on gender-differentiated audit quality has also emerged from European contexts, introducing exceedingly interesting findings as well. For example, an exploratory study by Ittonen and Peni (2012) using a small sample of firms from Finland, Denmark and Sweden finds that audit fees are higher for female auditors. Hardies et al. (2015) provide evidence from the Belgian market that clients pay higher audit fees to female auditors. They state that this fee premium may exist because of gender differences in knowledge, skills, abilities, preferences and behaviors or because of supply-side factors (for example, a demand for diversity, gendered perceptions regarding audit quality, or client satisfaction).

Del Baldo et al., (2018) in their recent study of 2018 make a comparison of the representation and role of women in the auditing profession in two countries, Romania and Italy. Their focus is not only on practicing accounting, but also on women representation in important Committees and Boards in both countries. As we can expect some countries are more diverse than others when it comes to women being part of the accountancy profession. Accordingly, the results of Del Baldo et al., (2018) study showed that the presence of women in the profession varies strongly: women in accountancy in Italy are 31.6% and 77.9% in Romania. One reason the authors bring out to explain the high number of women in the accounting profession from Romania, is the long period of Romania being under a communist regime, under which minorities, poor classes and women had access to better opportunities. Women were placed on a pedestal and encouraged to get out from their households, get a degree and find a job and accounting / economy was considered to be an appropriate profession for women. Another explanation could be the fact that the accounting field is inherently viewed as a feminine one which would explain also the high number of female graduates in the field of accountancy and auditing.

One study of 2019 which was performed in the context of a PhD study in the University of Tirana, Department of Accounting and which focused on the Tax Auditing found differences in gender distribution among tax auditors in Albania. Thus, if comparing the percentage of inspectors by position with the percentage by gender it was found that approximately 71% of the tax auditors working in the back office operations were female and the rest (29%) are male, whereas tax auditors who work with auditing on site (controlling entities) are categorized as 19% female and 81% male. This is an interesting finding that may represent the common view point in Albania that on site (control) tax auditors' positions are widely considered to be "men job positions".

Through the papers revised during the literature review phase of this research we formed the opinion that it is not an easy subject to study the linkage between gender and auditing. Therefore this article remains an explorative research study, trying to draw for the first time an overall context about the environment, current situation, driving forces and the challenges of women auditors in Albania. Another purpose of the study is to also focus somewhat deeper into the factors that might explain gender disparity in top executive positions in auditing. Another side result of the study we found to be the exploration of the factors that motivate women in the auditing profession to move up in their career and to engage in leadership and decision making positions.

3. WOMEN IN ACCOUNTING & AUDITING: A GLOBAL AND LOCAL VIEW

In this section of the paper we try to bring data and an overall context of what the numbers are of women representation in the audit profession, both globally and in Albania, and both regarding the internal and external auditing.

Women in Internal Auditing

That in general women are already well represented in the profession, in an overall context it is a conclusion, already drawn from the literature review presented in the previous section. Another conclusion which is more disturbing, and also a driving force for this paper, is that the higher you go in the rankings of an auditing / accounting firm, and the accounting profession in general, the less women you will find. This, is not only reported in research and studies, but also in reports who focus on most recent data. To have a general overview of female auditors' representation in the profession we will begin by giving data on the Internal Audit globally, and then will focus on specific information from Albania.

The study of 2015 from the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) on *Women in Internal Auditing* is one that shows remarkable results on what is the current situation of women participation in the auditing profession, having a focus in internal audit field only. The survey of this study summarized interesting data but also revealed several important differences between men and women in internal auditing that may tend to influence career success. Only about 12% of chief financial officers (CFOs) at Fortune 500 companies are women. Also, the survey data indicated that approximately 30% of Chief Auditing Executives (CAEs) at public companies are women.

In the same study of IIA, on average, women self-assessed themselves lower in all 10 of the core competencies defined in The IIA's Global Internal Audit Competency Framework, especially early in their careers. Female participants were also less likely than men to diversify their expertise, either through formal education or through attainment of professional certifications. There were also notable differences in the tools used by male and female CAEs to assess internal audit quality. Men and women were equally likely to report having a well-defined quality assurance and improvement program (QAIP); but on average, the men were significantly more likely to report the use tools such as balanced scorecards, surveys of audit clients, and peer reviews to assess the quality of their internal audit functions.

Especially at larger organizations, this study indicated that top management positions in internal auditing are more often held by men than by women. But while there is a distinct "gender gap" in internal auditing, that gap seems to be narrowing. On average, the women who participated in the survey held lower-level positions than the men, but they were also generally younger than their male counterparts. This suggests that as the relatively younger female workforce ages, the number of women moving into senior positions in internal auditing may probably increase and that we may have another perspective after several years.

In the internal auditing profession, as well as in other professions, the ratio of women to men in leadership positions varies widely between regions and between countries within regions. With regard to other professions, a recent report by Grant Thornton shows that in Russia, 40% of senior management positions are held by women, which is the highest percentage of women in leadership globally. In contrast,

in Japan, only 8% of senior management positions are held by women. Globally, women represent 31% of the CAEs, 33% of directors or senior managers, 34% of managers, and 44% of internal audit staff.

On average, female internal auditors are younger than their male counterparts. Also, female CAEs are generally younger and have fewer years of experience than male CAEs. Despite some differences across industries, there do not appear to be any overwhelmingly male-dominated or female-dominated industries in internal auditing, that is there is no specific industry which might be male dominated or female dominated³. Half of the female CAEs surveyed work in internal audit departments with three or fewer employees.

In an interview, Larry Harrington (CAE Raytheon, United States), suggested this possibility: *“This is a huge challenge for our profession. We lose too many quality women before they reach the CAE role... Studies document the value women bring to all senior level positions, and we must work harder to encourage women to stay within internal audit long enough to become CAEs.”* Benefits experienced by Women in Internal Audit are several, for example women’s communication styles and soft skills can be very effective for interacting with clients and auditees and this can very well explain several findings on literature review suggesting that women are sometimes more highly paid than their male peers.

Following the global survey of IIA, we tried to replicate the same study in Albania. We aimed to perform a similar survey on the situation of women representation in the IA sector in Albania and for this purpose we tried several times to contact the Institute of Internal Auditors in Albania. They did not, in any case, gave any answer to our requests for information. Therefore, there is no data in this section about women representation in IA profession in Albania and also that is why we extended the selection of data gathering to IA as well (see the following section).

Women in External Auditing

In 2016, AFECA (Association des Femmes diplômées d’Expertise Comptable Administrateur) conducted a study over 24 professional bodies from different European countries, Albania among them, on the representation of women in audit profession, Boards, Committees, Councils, etc. Professional bodies were willing to provide information on matters that concern mainly gender and gender diversity in their respective organizations. The analysis was performed following 12 main categories, related to gender, such as the law on gender equality, quotas on boards, the percentage of women on boards, women in accountancy, and the possibility of adopting a more flexible schedule to better balance work life with family life.

AFECA study represents a European benchmark on valorizing women’s capital in the accountancy profession. The study conducted by AFECA aimed to obtain an overview of progress within the 24 institutes from 22 countries concerning

³ Most CAEs at educational service organizations are women and this is one finding from the global survey of the IIA in 2015 that we had to include in our study.

the valorization of women capital and provoke exchanges and the sharing of best practices (AFECA and FEE 2016). This benchmark, useful for the assessment and comparison of the respective situations, was intended to generate dynamic movement (without stigmatization and making value-based judgments) and allow each institute member (FEE or EFAA) to learn some lessons for their strategies in the field of the development and balance of human capital. Moreover, the key findings of the survey contribute to the reinforcement of collective action for parity and professional balance.

The AFECA study revealed deep discrepancies across Europe about the total level of women representation in the audit profession, as well as representation in higher rankings such as in Boards, Council, etc. The study also demonstrated the vast variety of considering other more deep qualitative dimensions of the audit profession such as the work life balance and quality of life. What we can conclude from this study, is that sometimes we need to get behind just the numbers of women representation only, so as to better understand the factors that impact achieving a high life quality for female auditors.

Women representation in accounting and auditing in Albania.

The situation in Albania represents a somewhat different picture from what we find in most European or Anglo-Saxon countries. Almost 55% of the active auditors in Albania are women⁴ which is well above the average of overall representation levels for other European countries involved in this study. This could be explained by several factors, which are similar with factors in other Eastern European countries, such as the continuous high number of female accountancy students compared to male students (ever since the Communist Regime and still going on) and the fact that the profession has long been regarded to be a typical “women” profession.

This is, though a very rounded and rough representations of facts, because if we analyze the information a little deeper, according the rankings of female auditors in various levels of executive positions in companies, committees, boards, councils, etc., we can see it from a different perspective. For example in the IEKA Council, the highest body of governing the most important organization of professional auditors in Albania we find that out of 7 representatives, only 2 are women (that is 29%). But, the Head of Council as well as the Executive Director of IEKA are both women, thus deflating just slightly the previous result which is not at all representative of the numbers of the vast community of auditors in Albania. Again what we see in this, it is the common global trend that either women are under-represented in the audit profession, or if they are sufficiently or highly represented, the decision making or governing bodies of the profession are mainly dominated by men, Albania being the latter case.

⁴ AFECA study 2016 and also according the Participants Registrar, BMP webpage, October 2019.

In the Board of Directors of the Public Oversight Board (BMP), which is a key body in the supervision of the auditing and accountancy profession we find that only 40% are women. We also find that both the Chair of the Board of Directors and also the Executive Director of BMP are men. Similarly, in the Commission of Examinations for Profession (KPAP), a structure dependent of BMP and also of great importance for the first stage of entering the audit profession, we find that again, women represent 40% of the members of the Commission and the Chief of this Commission is not a woman.

At the National Accounting Council (NAC), another important structure in the profession for Albania, (although not directly related to auditors only), we find a counter stream trend. Out of 8 members of the Directing Board of NAC, only two are men, including the Head of the NAC. This means that in this important decision making body for accountancy profession in Albania there are as much as 75% of women representatives.

Next, we analyzed the other professional organizations operating in Albania, even though their scope is for accounting and not for auditors. The reason we expanded the coverage of study, is that usually, following the profession trend, the individuals start the freelance careers by working as accountants and then move on to get the certification as auditors. In the highest positions of the Institute of Certified Accountants (IKM), which is one of the largest professional organizations in Albania, we find only one woman out of 6 members in its Council that is only 17% representation for women. Moreover, the Head of the Council of IKM is a man. But, on the positive side we find good presentation of women in the IKM's Audit Committee (100%) and somewhat positive in its Control Committee and Executive Staff (only 33%). The other big accountancy professional organization in Albania, SHKFSH, has no women in its Council or Board of Directors, just men.

Whereas, if we focus on the auditing companies we also perceive a similar pattern. As stated above in this paper based on the information from Deloitte, the biggest auditing company in Albania, we find that it has only 33% of female representatives among managing partners whereas in lower levels we find increasingly more women (57% among directors and senior managers and 67% female representatives among managers). The case of Deloitte Albania is also another representation of the overall observation, introduced above that the higher you go in an auditing company, the less women auditors you will find, even though there are more women than men that study accounting and auditing in Universities and that first enter the profession. Still we have to stress that the figures coming from Deloitte Albania on the levels of women representation are better than those coming from Deloitte global.

4. STUDY OF CHALLENGES OF THE AUDITING ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN IN ALBANIA

Because we want to add a qualitative dimension to this discussion on women representation in the auditing profession in this section of the paper we focus on analyzing the background, context and the challenges that women auditors have perceived and have experienced in Albania.

The methodology and the data of the study

Because we are interested to have specific and genuine opinions about real challenges that women auditors perceive during their career we have used interviews with open ended questions. We have considered it to be more useful to have a fewer number of detailed and descriptive interviews, rather than to have a higher number of less detailed closed ended questionnaires. In this way we could gather the qualitative data that we aim for and in the same time could assure the anonymity of the interviews, which we have to mention, was an area of concern for some of the respondents.

The interviews were designed with two section. Section I focused on general questions, such as the age of the respondents, their qualifications, the company they work for and the current job position as well as the number of years in the last job position. Our aim was to gather mainly opinions from auditors with a certain maturity in their profession. Thus they would be more experienced to share with us challenges in the profession not only in the first career stages, but also from later stages. Section II of the interviews, contained open ended specific questions which focused on searching more in-depth qualitative facts about the careers of the respondents. There are only 7 questions in this second and also last section of the interviews, because we wanted to keep it short, so as to not be burdensome and not to lose the interest from respondents. First, we ask if their direct superior is a man or a woman, and then we ask them if their dependents are mostly men or women, and what is the ratio between them. Other informative questions follow in the interviews such as: *Are there any plans of gender equality and /or life quality balance in the company you are currently working and do you think they are effective or not? Mention some of the most important challenges you have experienced during your career since the early stages. Do you think any of these challenges is typical Albanian and grounded in the Albanian cultural and contextual job environment? Which do you think are the current aspects of your profession that you think could actually hinder you to achieve self-realization? If you could, what would you change in your current job situation, in order to improve work and life for yourselves and also for your female colleagues?* For all of the above open ended questions the interviews provided suggested topics (especially valuable for the cases when interviews were completed online via email and not in person), but the respondents were advised and encouraged to add other ideas and topics according their specific experiences. When and if possible, some of the interviews were delivered in person. We have completed 13 interviews in total, which we found all valid to be used in the phases of analysis of the information.

The analysis of gathered data

In general the interviews were expected very warmly from the majority of the respondents. After submitting or completing the interviews they stated that this was an interesting topic to discuss about and they felt very good being part of it. We also found that the majority of respondents had given a lot of details, and innovative and creative ideas while completing the interviews.

After analyzing the information which was based on 13 interviews we form a complete overview of the descriptive of our pre-selected sample. We find that the median age of the respondents is around 30 and that in average their total experience in the profession is almost 10 years which shows enough experience in the profession. We also find that the median for the experience in the current job position is only one year, which demonstrates the high dynamics in the audit profession, with employees continually moving up the scale of promotions. Half of the respondents currently work for auditing companies (of which 4 of the respondents work in one of the big fours); having said that we also observed that even other respondents had worked for one of the big fours in the past (almost 70% of the respondents had been part of big fours at a certain point in their past). Two of the respondents are working for banks, two for private companies and two work as freelance auditors. In majority the respondents of this study work in big companies, which have clear rules of business conduct and a structured organization of job positions; only two of the respondents work in rather small companies, with less than ten employees. Regarding level of qualification, almost all are highly qualified – except for only two respondents, all of them hold either ACCA certification or IKM / AL certification.

Concerning the linkage between superiors and dependents, we noticed that most of them report to have more women than men as dependents, but the majority of them have men as their direct superiors (7 of them have male superiors, 4 have women superiors, and 2 have both a men and a woman as superiors). It was interesting to find in our studied sample, the same patterns of gender disparity, in favor of men, the general rule being the higher you get on companies the more men you find that are in directing, managing and executive positions.

Regarding the questions at the second section of the interview, specifically whether any *plans of gender equality and / or life quality balance are effective in the companies* we find, not surprisingly, that big four audit companies and other big private companies have implemented plans of gender equality. Surprisingly though, we find that banks do not seem to have implemented such plans. One specifically intriguing answer comes from one respondent who actually works for a small accountancy company who regarded working in that environment the same as interacting with family and that for her this was even more important than having gender equality and life quality balance because it assured her that for every problem or unexpected event, the colleagues and the superior would be understanding and supportive. Another original perspective is offered from one of the respondents who left one of the big fours after a long career for more than 15 years, to open her own

company and to promote what she believed to be even better than gender equality, *gender diversity*, that is the promotion of women for what they are more distinguished and capable to achieve in a company. When interviewing her, and discussing this specific idea, we could not leave out of the conversation what was also one of the findings of the global survey of IIA, the special characteristics and traits of a woman are what make her more suitable for certain engagements in profession, where more empathy, compassion, persistence and reliability, that is more of the so called “soft skills” are required.

Another request for the interviewed subjects was to *mention some of the most important challenges they had experienced during their career*. As expected we find the most mentioned challenge the long working hours which prohibited the women auditors to carry on a proper family life, engage in physical activities or pursue other hobbies; nearly all respondents mentioned long working hours as a substantial challenge. Next, we find as a common challenge the continuous work stress due to many insecurities linked to the especially dynamic professional environment, continuous deadlines and pressure, which really consume the energies of employees. Also, long working hours and an overall high work overload represented a difficulty to career advancement and professional certification requirements, especially in earlier stages of career. Another often mentioned challenge was the fact of just being “a woman” dealing with male clients. The respondents report that it has been difficult for them to build an image for themselves as professional women, who are capable at their work.

When asked if any of the above challenges could be viewed as being *typical for the Albanian culture and environment*, almost all respondents pointed out several interesting factors. First the “professional woman having to deal with male clients and making a place for herself in the profession”. They mention cases when clients have been quite direct and have specifically asked for male auditors and not female and have stated that they prefer to work with males rather than females. And not only clients; in one case, one respondent reported that her direct superior was suggesting to include a man in the audit team, “just in case”. In other cases, clients have not been convinced by conclusions of the female auditor, and they have asked for a second opinion now from a second auditor, which should be a man. This specific challenge can be considered linked with the typical mentality of Albanians, because, as respondents report it does not happen with foreign clients to ask specifically to have man to audit their companies. A second typical Albanian challenge would be the working culture in Albania: driven by working time and not by performance and results, thus leading to nonperformance management, low productivity and motivation for employees, low creativity on behalf of employees and low salaries associated of course with low level of ethics and integrity. Yet, another country specific challenge would be the high variability and subjectivity of interpretation of cases, especially in tax auditing which increase the work load and the stress experienced by auditors.

The interviewed subjects were also asked about *the current aspects of their profession that could actually hinder them to be self-realized in life and profession*. Again, we found a very rich pool of ideas, varying from having to deal with male clients for whom it seemed to be difficult to interact with female auditors, even in the cases when the female auditor was able to “find a solution for complicated cases”, to the complaining of some respondents about many “unnecessary” business dinners with clients and co-employees for on their opinion these imposed social engagements and “team building” activities really were not necessary and took time from their families engagements and personal hobbies. Another hindrance could also be the requirement (for many opening job positions or job promotions) to not have personal engagements. Many, especially young, professionals saw that as a demotivational call to build a personal life and to invest in families and other time requiring interests in life.

Finally, we asked the respondents what they would *change, if they could, about their current work situation, in order to improve work and life for themselves and also for their female colleagues*. Suggestions like assigning certain quotas for female superior positions, job sharing initiatives, flexible working hours, working from home for a certain amount of hours per week / month, higher health compensating packages, offering daycare coverage services in the workplace premises so the mothers could work more relaxed, were among the most mentioned ideas from our pooled group of respondents. Except these already common ideas in improving work life balance, other original ideas were presented, like offering a balance of life / work even to men in our workplace so they can also have more time to invest in their families, or offering mentorship in a company so as to build colleagues and dependents not only professionally but also personally in ethics and integrity features and even suggestions for family trips and vacations which would compensate for long working hours away from family.

5. MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to search for the main challenges that female auditors are currently facing in a specific environment, such as Albania. Having almost no previous data, research or study in this field for our country, this paper mainly aims to tackle in general this discipline rather than to expand extensively and research it thoroughly. Therefore, given the restrictions of limited findings in literature review, concerning Albania but also other European countries, and also faced with limitations in gathering the necessary information about the numbers of women representations in certain boards and councils (webpages not usually disclosing this kind of data, and also non reaction in case of directly contacting these institutions for asking that information), we designed the methodology of this study around an interview with a limited number of open ended questions. Through this interview directed to a pool of pre-selected women auditors, who were prominent in their field and who had enough experience, we aimed to gain the necessary insights as to pinpoint which are the most prominent challenges women are facing today.

From the first section of the interview, which contains questions regarding the descriptive statistics of the sample, we see that respondents are highly qualified with renowned titles in profession (ACCA/AL/KM), they are in high or top positions in their companies and have had previous experiences in various fields and companies, especially big fours. Some of the first characteristics that stands out from the first section of the interview is: the high rate of turnover regarding audit job positions, with women having as few as 4 months in current positions, which reveals a highly dynamic work sector; the majority of respondents had women as dependents but mostly men as their superior, again reinforcing the idea that although there may be more women working as auditors in Albania, fewer women are in top directing and executive positions. Not only from the interview, but also based in the analysis of the composition of BMP, IEKA, KKK, IKM and SHKFSH (section 2 of this paper) we noticed an utterly low level of unrepresentativeness of women in top levels of important institutions of the profession.

The second part of the interviews revealed some expected and also some unexpected challenges about the profession. The first ranked challenge was the long working hours which prohibited the women auditors to carry on a healthy family lifestyle, engage in physical activities or pursue other hobbies; nearly all the respondents mentioned long working hours as a substantial challenge. Continuous work stress, difficulties to advance in career and professional certification requirements, and the fact of just being “a woman” having to deal with male clients were other commonly mentioned challenges. As about *typical challenges for the Albanian culture and environment*, almost all respondents agreed on “being a professional woman having to deal with man and making a place for herself in the profession”, the working culture in Albania which is driven by working time and not by performance and the high variability and subjectivity of interpretation of cases, especially in tax auditing which increased the work load and the stress experienced by auditors.

The aspects of the auditing profession that women auditor perceived as hindrances to their self-realization were: difficulties to interact with male clients (usually Albanians) who explicitly asked to work with male auditors; the high number of “unnecessary” business dinners which took time from their families engagements and personal hobbies; the often discussed requirement of many opening job positions or job promotions to not have personal engagements which seemed to discourage young professionals to invest in building family life and other hobbies.

Finally, what they would change for better, if they could: increasing the quotas for female superior positions, job sharing initiatives, flexible working hours, working from home for a certain amount of hours per week / month, higher health compensating packages, offering daycare coverage services in the workplace premises so the mothers could work more relaxed. Other innovative ideas we could discuss were offering a balance of life / work also to men so that they can also have more time to invest in their families, offering mentorships in order to build colleagues and dependents up not only professionally but also personally. *Gender*

diversity is also another original idea generated from these interviews, which is to promote women for those characteristics that we already know women are best at, and also men for those characteristics that they are more distinguished for.

As much as this paper tried to analyze the current situation of women in auditing profession in Albania focusing in their challenges, we are aware that this is just a first step towards future and more qualitative studies in this discipline. Further surveys, analysis and data would give a far more clear perspective on current trends and perspectives of the interrelation between auditing and gender equality plans for a special country like Albania.

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